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HAIG SAYS U.S. SEEKS CONSENSUS STRATEGY IN MIDEAST REGION

By **BERNARD GWERTZMAN**

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WASHINGTON, March 19 — Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. said today that the Reagan Administration would try to develop a strategic "consensus" to counter the Soviet Union in an area stretching from Pakistan to Egypt and including such disparate nations as Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Haig also held out the possibility of improved relations with Iraq, one of the most anti-Israel nations in the region, and one that has been closely identified with the Soviet Union in the past. He said Washington had noted "some shift" in Iraqi policy, caused, in part, he said, by "a greater sense of concern about the behavior of Soviet imperialism in the Middle Eastern area."

Mr. Haig's stress on a "strategic consensus" in the region is consistent with the efforts made by the Carter Administration after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979. But Mr. Haig's remarks seemed to suggest a greater stress on persuading the Arabs and Israel, as well as Pakistan and Turkey, to join in some kind of unofficial and nonspecific arrangement to counter Soviet influence in the region. In his remarks, he did not seem to be suggesting the establishment of any kind of structured alliance — he described the arrangement as a "consensus of strategic concerns" — but implied a hope that key nations in the region would recognize that the Soviet Union represented a serious threat to their interests and would therefore see the need to cooperate with the United States.

Fears of a Conflict With Cuba

Besides the Middle East, the questions posed to Mr. Haig by the committee dealt mostly with the senators' concerns over the possibility that the United States might become involved in a conflict with Cuba over future Cuban arms deliveries to leftists in El Salvador.

Their apprehension, particularly among the committee's Democrats, was prompted by testimony yesterday from Walter J. Stoessel Jr., the Under Secre-

tary of State for Political Affairs, who said he would not rule out the possibility of military action if Cuba attempted to step up delivery of arms. Mr. Stoessel added that the flow of weapons had slowed in recent weeks.

Today Mr. Haig tried to maintain the Administration's deliberate ambiguity on the question.

Military Force Not Excluded

To keep the Cubans off guard, he said, it would be wrong to exclude the use of military actions at some future time.

"I think the American people anticipate that this Administration is going to deal with this longstanding question with clarity of thought, with firmness in purpose," he said of the problem of coping with subversive activities by Cuba in other countries. "That would of necessity include consideration of a whole range of American assets."

On the other hand, he stressed that "no decisions have been made; the President has not arrived at any policy; none has been specifically recommended to him."

To ease Senate concerns he said that while military force could not be excluded, he did not want anyone to believe that "worst-case scenarios are being nurtured by some special groups within the Administration."

Yesterday, in testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Haig touched on his plan to bring about a sense of common purpose in the Middle East. "We feel it is fundamentally important," he said, "to begin to develop a consensus of strategic concerns throughout the region among Arab and Jew and to be sure that the overriding danger of Soviet inroads into this area are not overlooked."

In recent weeks Mr. Haig has indicated privately and publicly that he wants to give priority to security questions in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf regions, even while not rejecting the idea of reviving peace talks. He plans to visit Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia early next month and is expected to develop these themes at greater length then.

Pakistan of Particular Concern

Today he indicated that he wanted to bring Pakistan and Turkey into his strategic "consensus." In response to a question he said it was in the American interest to establish "a consensus, in the strategic regional sense, among the states of the area, stretching from Pakistan to the east, to Egypt to the West, including Turkey, Israel and the other threatened states."

Pakistan, bordering on Afghanistan,

where some 35,000 Soviet troops are thought by Washington to pose a threat to the Persian Gulf region, is of particular concern to the Reagan Administration, Mr. Haig said. Pakistan receives no American aid, even though it is ostensibly an American ally. Pakistan's clandestine nuclear weapons program makes it ineligible for assistance under current American law.

Mr. Haig told Senator Alan Cranston, Democrat of California, who is deeply concerned about stopping the nuclear programs in Pakistan and Iraq, that "it is my belief that you get more by removing the insecurities that foster the nuclear thirst" among countries like Pakistan.

He said he hoped Congress would modify the law so that Washington can "re-establish a dialogue of trust and confidence" with Pakistan. The Carter Administration had planned to seek changes in the law but dropped the idea when Pakistan's leader rejected a the offer of a two-year \$400 million aid package as "peanuts."

Signs of a Shift in Iraq

As to Iraq, which has no formal diplomatic ties with the United States because of Washington's support for Israel, Mr. Haig said, "We see some shift in the Iraqi attitude — a greater concern on the part of the Iraqi leadership, perhaps as a result of the conflict with Iran, or changes that have occurred in Iraq, or perhaps as the result of recent events in Afghanistan, a greater sense of concern about the behavior of Soviet imperialism in the Middle Eastern area."

"I think we're going to have to assess very carefully in the period ahead and not find ourselves in an irreversible set of relationships," he said. He said Iraq might want to pursue a more moderate course in nuclear policy and toward the West.

This has been the general view of many Western experts for more than a year, but so far Iraq has rejected offers of improved ties to Washington even though its relations with Moscow are strained.

It was learned that the State Department is considering sending a special envoy next month to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to report on Mr. Haig's Middle Eastern trip. Another envoy will be sent to the Persian Gulf states.

Equivocal on El Salvador

On El Salvador, Mr. Haig was equivocal about the overall prospects.

Although there has been a slowdown in the arms flow through Nicaragua to El Salvador, he said there were also "conflicting intelligence reports" that Nicaragua was seeking alternative routes into El Salvador.

"So it's essentially a mixed situation which is more positive than negative but which still requires the most careful and continuing assessment and scrutiny," he said.

Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, the ranking Democrat on the committee, pressed Mr. Haig to explain his remarks yesterday that there was a theory that four American churchwomen murdered in El Salvador in December had tried to run through a roadblock or were per-

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ceived as having done so.

He said that in testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee he had given "the most prominent theory" on what happened. He said that an autopsy of one of the victims showed that pieces of the windshield had been "propelled into her body by the bullet."

Times of Turmoil

"Someone constructed the theory," he said, "that either they were perceived or had been actually running the road-block."

"Now in times of turmoil, and difficulty, and crisis, and warfare, and young people are given arms, they could have misread the mere traveling of that party down that road as an effort to run a road-block and could have fired into the vehi-

cle, killed one or more of the passengers and panicked, killed the rest and tried to dispose of them," he said. "I laid that out as one of the prominent theories of what might have happened. I hope it doesn't get distorted or perverted emotionally and incorrectly."

He denied that he meant to imply he believed the women had tried to violate Salvadoran laws. He also said he had not meant to suggest that there was a possibility they had fired back at the killers.

In Ossining, N.Y., Sister Martha Bourne of the Maryknoll Sisters said the community had not heard anything from its own sources in El Salvador that would indicate the nuns were running a road-block. "I can't imagine anybody in their right mind would have tried to do that," she said.